

Lisa Tan

Sunsets  
Notes From Underground  
Waves

Archive Books

# The Shadow is Just as Tangible as the Origin

by Mara Lee

*It alters everything*

It took me a while to accept that the central theme in *Sunsets* is not translation.

The video revolves around an interview with the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. She is presented through several layers of mediation: in the video we see a computer screen which shows us an old television studio where the writer sits reclining in a sofa chair. The gap between the keen interviewer and Lispector's integrity is abyssal, and their words reach us through a Portuguese interpreter. On the screen the year 1977 indicates the time of the recording. Same year as the death of the author. A vertiginous tension splits the observer in two: she will die, she has already died. Or to say it with Roland Barthes: "By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future."<sup>1</sup>

In the interview, Lispector talks about "Mineirinho"—a short narrative about a thief who is shot thirteen times by the police. How revolted she felt about the thirteen shots. One would have sufficed.

But instead of turning to death itself, the story turns to the concept of *life* in order to grasp this death, and describes life in its multitude and incomprehensibility. *Sunsets*, on the other hand, speaks explicitly about death, while its addressee is life. The subjective camera gaze is filtered through all-but-mortal stillness. We catch glimpses of a world where the sunlight at three am in the summer is a dead ringer for the light at three pm in the winter.

Minimal movement.

June through December and twilight insists.

The slow camera turns almost everything in its way into still-lifes: a hand resting on a steering wheel, a drooping bouquet of tulips, a sleeping

lover. In the end, day and night, life and death are intertwined. *Sunsets* is balancing on this liminal edge. By doing this, life comes across as something inherently alien, strange. Invaded by night.

This alien life might be described as the “experience of the other night,” in the words of Maurice Blanchot, a night that doesn’t embrace sleep or rest, ecstasy, or rapture. The other night is endless vigilance, interspersed by phantoms and ghosts.

If *Sunsets* might be seen as a negotiation of Blanchot’s other night—then translation is the key instrument of this negotiation.

How?

Spivak: “In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

The poet Robert Frost is often ascribed the infamous words, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Whether or not he uttered them, this view implies a notion of poetry conceived as origin, and translation as a bland copy. But the fact that some phenomena seem untranslatable doesn’t indicate that translation per se is insufficient, it only means that our universe is complex. Loss is not more inherent in translation than in any other language use. But alienation is. Let’s ask Anne Carson if you don’t believe it.

In her study *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson says the poet Paul Celan, “uses language as if he were always translating.”<sup>3</sup> Why? And how? Alienation. Strangeness that arose as the consequence of his war trauma and exile.

All other comparisons aside—translation in *Sunsets* is not a translation of “something,” but the very “something” in itself, the very language it speaks. In a place where the difference between day and night is erased twice a year, what does “day” mean? Does it mean “night”? *Sunsets* attempts to comprehend this twilight through the work of translation. Translation is enacted before our very eyes, and the viewers perceive all the cuts, joints, seams, and transitions in their materiality. Travelling from one language to another, one place to another, changes you. What changes?

It doesn’t alter anything.  
It doesn’t alter anything.  
It doesn’t alter anything.

These are the words Clarice Lispector says in Portuguese when asked whether she believes that she or the story “Mineirinho” can change anything. Three times the interpreter repeats these words in English. But when a single meaning travels between two languages six times, then something is altered. The displacement of the repetition and the translation enacts a minimal linguistic defiance, a resistance against the finality of Lispector’s words. The translation introduces otherness, but also movement, uncertainty that constitutes a counter language against the vestiges of death in the language of Lispector. The most prominent example is when Lispector utters her last words in the video: “I am speaking from my tomb.” At first, the interpreter misunderstands, gets it wrong, hesitates. But suddenly a cry of joy pierces the air—and so the morose tone of the words is displaced entirely towards something else. “No! No! No! I talking from my... *tomb!*” the interpreter triumphantly cries out. This is not death speaking anymore, this speech does not arise from the tomb, but from sheer, vibrant life. Hereby, life as difference, as change and as translation, is inscribed into death.

#### *Katabasis and sparagmos*

The place of language is prominent in the three videos. The place of writing is prominent. Clarice Lispector, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf. But none of the three videos are actually about the writers. If translation can be perceived as a research tool in *Sunsets*, then the writers can be said to perform as vehicles for Tan’s overall examination of liminal phenomena—for instance, between night and day, underground and above ground. This question is most explicitly addressed in *Notes From Underground*, in which the artist straddles one of the most evocative Ancient Greek myths—that of *katabasis*, the poet’s descent into the underworld. Poets and artists have long struggled with the myth of Orpheus, and its renderings are manifold. Short version: Orpheus pleads to Hades, King of the Underworld, for his loved one, Eurydice, who has died of a snakebite,

to return to the living. Since no one could mourn as beautifully as the lyrical poet Orpheus, Hades yields to his request, under one condition: upon the journey to the light, Orpheus is forbidden to look back. Just as they reach the surface, Orpheus turns his head, and Eurydice falls back into the shadows. Thus she dies a second time, and henceforth Orpheus can only sing about his loved one, but never have her.

The most prevalent interpretations emphasize the sacrificial gesture of art, how the poet gives up his loved one for the sake of art's higher cause. Feminist counter-readings call attention to Eurydice, and problematize her role as mere object of the male gaze and desire.<sup>4</sup>

The myth continues with the ferocious death of Orpheus, torn apart by raging Thracian women. The dismembering of Orpheus is an example of *sparagmos*, the Dionysian ritual that involves Maenads (or Bacchantes). In a more modern rendering though, *sparagmos* is not confined to one sole literary motive. Considering, for example, the literary fragment from the point of view of *sparagmos* would enable the reader to not only to perceive the fragment in terms of form, but also as linked to an originary violence. Also, according to literary scholar Anders Olsson, *sparagmos* might be read as a liminal experience, and the one who sings is "a voice from the border, in dispersion."<sup>5</sup>

So, the question is: What kind of hell does the artist encounter in her modern katabasis?

*Notes From Underground* undertakes a descent that is accompanied by the voice of Susan Sontag. Why? Here *The Divine Comedy* by Dante—the world's second-most famous katabasis—provides an indication: Sontag is neither the subject or object of the video, but nothing more or less than the artist's guide in the underworld, as Virgil was Dante's guide. By means of old recordings and interviews, Sontag's voice rises from the shadows, and uncannily enough, the mediations only seem to reinforce her presence.

The choice of Sontag as guide is not only due to her grandeur as a writer: like Tan, she is an American working in the field of art who at a certain period of her life moved to Stockholm for professional reasons. (Let us recollect that Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in exile.) Now, the move from The United States to Sweden is not comparable to the ban-

ishment Dante was subjected to, but the experience of inner exile is not always stirred by excommunication or banishment. Inner exile is marked by liminal experience: a border that feels, like skin, a feeling border.<sup>6</sup>

Worth noting though: Tan is no stranger to diasporic experience—like a red thread, it runs through her family history. Dispersion, in other words, is not mere metaphor in her work—it is literal, material, and historic reality. It is not surprising, thus, that Tan works with geographical layering in *Notes From Underground*. Stratigraphy is used here as a method for uncovering alternative histories. No, wrong of me, I mean a method for *writing* alternative histories. In a way, the artist performs subjective, historical research, but refrains from letting private experience tower in the foreground. Autobiography is not a concern of Tan's. She refuses, consequently, to let her work be reduced to autobiographical self-representation. Sure, an isolated reference to the artist's childhood is made, but not to reinforce a biographical narrative. On the contrary, these occasional references are deliberately empty, signifiers without signifieds, as when the artist says, "That's mine," in a conversation about things in storage. What she refers to as "mine" is hidden from the viewer, as are the things she has kept in storage over the years. Thereby occluding the possibility of biographical interpretation: we know there is a personal history, something that is "mine," a childhood, a lifeline, but the main purpose of referencing this is to place it in relation to a larger picture. One might say that the artist inscribes her life into the overarching structures of both descent and dispersion, both katabasis and *sparagmos*.

These two main lines in *Notes From Underground* are embodied by the sequences shot on the subway. The downward movement converges with a sprawling, dispersing one. As we find ourselves inside a subway car, the name of a station flickers by: Hallonbergen (Raspberry Mountains). We are on the blue subway line in Stockholm. Unlike the two other subway lines that start in the suburbs, cross the city center and then continue to another suburban area, the blue line starts in the very center of Stockholm, then moves outward to the suburbs, which makes its demographic journey so startlingly evident. The suburbs located at the outer end of the blue line lodge an abundance of histories that are rarely told: diasporic histories, experiences of exile. The artist deliberately abstains from getting close to these histories—you will find no attempt to represent the everyday experiences of non-European immigrants. Instead,

we find ourselves in almost empty subway cars, evacuated spaces. But this emptiness shouldn't be read as the artist trying to reproduce how immigrants are made invisible in Swedish society, because then these would no longer be "notes from underground." Instead, Tan creates an absence that is insistent, tangible. Embodied absence. How? The artist has moved to a country that presents itself as the most equal society in the world. But those of us who live in Stockholm experience, on an everyday basis, its adamant segregation, especially the divide between center and margin. On top of that, "Sweden is the country within the Economic Cooperation Organization OECD with the greatest difference in employment between native and foreign-born."<sup>7</sup> *Notes From Underground* doesn't explicitly address these particular problems, but the empty subway cars speak their own language of visualization and de-visualization. The viewer sees what isn't there. She sees what is not seen, not spoken.

Tan often returns to the concept of the liminal, the threshold. Linger in the farthest stations on the blue line means that we cannot close our eyes before yet another dimension that makes a neat division between visible and invisible, here and there, above and underground, impossible. Namely, violence. In other words, the boundary experience and the liminal require the acknowledgement of the violence by which that very boundary becomes visible: sparagmos, diaspora, dispersion.

The blue subway line is associated with violence. All the Stockholm suburbs with populations dominated by foreign-born, non-European immigrants are associated with violence. *Notes From Underground* also talks about violence. Sontag reflects upon the human capacity for cruelty, and stresses that instead of constantly manifesting surprise over it, we should understand this inclination. There is also the passage when a caller with a question wonders why we are not able to perceive those from other cultures, and specifically from Iraq, as human beings. We can guess that this question is asked during The United States' war against Iraq. Again, Sontag reveals herself as a tough realist without illusions, answering that "it's even worse."

The descent that takes place in *Notes From Underground*, the journey into the underworld that the artist sets out upon with Sontag as a guide, makes us attentive to what is not there: the obliteration of diasporic fragments of generations of human beings in exile. The sharp, snapping sound that runs through the video work is an orienting signal for blind

passengers, and you can only hear it on the blue line. It communicates in a language that most viewers don't understand, taking the shape of a provocative question flung at us: Which one of us is blind?

"I am a miner. The light turns blue. / Waxy stalactites / Drip and thicken, tears," writes Sylvia Plath in one of her most famous poems.<sup>8</sup>

Mining as a metaphor for the research process is just too self-evident for Tan's subtle and profound work, and still: the other journey that is undertaken in *Notes From Underground* is to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Why is that? Why turn to yet another foundational metaphor for Western thinking—Plato, Freud, you name it? Because, and this is the pivotal point throughout my essay, the cavern isn't a metaphor, it is real, lived life.

The viewer quickly understands that the artist visited these caverns often as a child, and now she returns there as an adult. The easiest thing would be to interpret this descent as a subjective liminal experience where personal history intersects with geologic past, and how different times and spaces intertwine. The viewer is introduced to dark, dripping underground caves. Beautiful, absurd—a tourist attraction. All this fuss to show us a tourist attraction? It strikes me once again that most things that are said in Tan's work are left unsaid, and, by showing us the shadows, the work points at other, unsaid and unseen shadows.

What are the shadows of Carlsbad Caverns? Why is our guide taking us there? Katabasis, sparagmos, diaspora. What is the unspeakable violence that this tourist attraction obscures? New Mexico is a state where the questions of limits, borders, and frontiers are most urgent. Within its population of Hispanics, Chicanos, Latinos, Mexicans, indigenous and native Americans there are thousands and thousands of histories of migration, diaspora, dispersion, and struggle. Again, the artist chooses not to address this fact explicitly, but the viewer can't but be made aware of it while following the ascending elevator ride. The elevator attendant asks: "Where you folks from?" The male voice answers quickly, steadily, no doubt or shivering in his voice: "I'm from Sweden. Stockholm." His national identity is stable. But the artist, on the other hand: "I live in Stockholm. But I grew up in this area." No further explanations, but the attentive listener will be reminded that the production of strangers intensifies each and every time the question "Where are you from?" is

demanded from us in a place that we call “home.” The ease by which our identities are cut in pieces, dispersed.

The old home and the new.

Underground, ancient caves, and the by now obsolete triumph of modernity in the form of the dispersing lines of the subway.

*Notes From Underground* is a narrative about migration and diaspora. But instead of trying to restore a subjective speaking position for the Other, Tan chooses to speak from within canonical narratives, opening them up for alternative interpretations. We must, however, mind the gaps, fractures and blind alleys. The Orpheus of our time knows that the chthonic moves in various directions: a subway line becomes a sound wave which points towards Tan’s third film, *Waves*. So the basic elements connect the three films: air, earth, water. But instead of fire, there is language.

*When did the sea become political?*

If translation is manifested as a method and a device to enable the inscription of strange life into death in *Sunsets*, then one may suggest that the modernist novel is a point of inspiration for the video *Waves*. More exactly, *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. But just as *Sunsets* is not an artwork about Lispector, *Waves* is not an artwork about Woolf, but about the liminal state between collectivity and annihilation.

The waves in this video can be construed as a figuration that connects and deletes by the very same movement. They address our longing after community/togetherness, but also the wiping out of the subject, nothingness, merging into the big blue, and thus the loss of ourselves. Waves connect time and space, rewrite borders, and enable alternative histories to surface. Because if “every word has its own shadow,” so with every wave there is an undertow, constitutive for the wave. Moving forward is also a drawing back. Applied to time and history, the movement of the wave stresses the movement of the return. In returning we connect with unwritten histories that alter what is yet to come. Returning enables the future to open in new ways.

The most conspicuous structuring element in *Waves* is provided by the voice-over. The artist is speaking herself. This approach marks a breach with the two other films. It comes as a surprise when the viewer realizes that the voice-over continues—and continues. Sometimes enlightening, sometimes trying, and sometimes outright frustrating as the voice thinks, corrects itself, repeats. The emphasis on the artistic process is evident. Next to the sound of the waves, the typing sounds from the keyboard stand out as the sonic leitmotif of the film.

This is also the one video in which Tan’s passionate relation to words and language is outed. Language as both *mater* and *matter*: primordial, bodily, and material. Listen to the voice-over repeating her alliterations: “[...] what merely is. Lispector called it the ‘it.’ Or the ‘is of the thing’” and “Servers simmer.” The pointy “i”, the hissing “s” carving out new paths in the sentences. It devours the sounds of the letters. A sensuous pleasure is connected to forming the sounds of language. The viewer perceives how different technologies of language coexist. We live in a culture that is oral, written, and digital. What happens then, when the oral and written traces of uncertainty, hesitation, and error, are so easily eliminated on our computer screens? And why is it that new technologies are working so hard to erase the material residues of our precarious bodies?

Cautiously, but consequently, Tan is attentive to all kinds of material residues—human, digital, natural. And maybe that is why the transitions seem so important. Like a tightrope walker, Tan balances smoothness and distinctness in the transitions between frames. The screen saver becomes a sound wave that becomes sky that becomes sea. Their identities are respectively intact, but when and how each transition starts is hard to discern. This can be read as a visual translation of Tan’s interest in correspondences.

Natural phenomena, such as waves, used as models for our thinking, are not news to the field of art and literature. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé, for instance, let the firmament serve as a pattern for his poem “Un coup de dés.” But searching for the new is not the intention in *Waves*. Rather, the returning movement of the waves is engaged on many different levels, for example, in the repetition of the artist’s own words, spoken as voice-over. She pauses, reverses, backspacing on the keyboard, repeating the last sentence over and over. But she also revisits old traditions of thought, such as the science of correspondences. Correspondence

is a key term for Tan in *Waves*, and she uses it in the modernist sense, reminiscent of Baudelaire, amongst others. But if Baudelaire's version of correspondence is but a shadow of Swedenborg's, isn't Tan's version just a shadow of a shadow? Yes and no. But the shadow only appears to be threatening to those who submit to the idea of an absolute origin. Tan, on the other hand, shows right through her work that the materiality of the shadow is just as tangible as the origin.

The artist writes the sea, and the sea writes new histories. Some of these histories mumble their way into oblivion, some are corrected and pass as acceptable records of documentation, while others drown in pink noise.

Which histories drown? If *Notes From Underground* involuntarily evokes an *active* absence of the bodies that populate the blue line, in some ways *Waves* addresses a similar, uncanny, present absence. Today, in Sweden, in Europe, more than anything, waves and the sea evoke the thought of migration. Never before has the idea of the sea seemed as alienated from the thought of the romanticism of Nature. Every day, new reports of nameless people drowned in the Mediterranean. Every day, we observe from a safe distance this limbo into which the sea has transformed. The sea, from a contemporary perspective, is not legible without considering the "flood of refugees" escaping war and terror. (I'll explain why I insist on this horrid metaphor soon enough.)

When explaining her use of the liminal, Tan refers to Jacques Derrida and the *arrivant*: "The absolute arrivant does not yet have a name or an identity".<sup>9</sup> And thus, this "someone or something that arrives" arrives in a place that is also de-identified. Our notions of home, identity, and borders are thus destabilized by the arrivant. S/he "does not simply cross a given threshold".<sup>10</sup> This "someone or something" might be "the immigrant, the emigrant, the guest, or the stranger." But most of all, it is someone whose arrival reinscribes how we conceive borders, and ultimately, death.

And in the same way, the arrivant does something to the idea of the threshold, the "flood of refugees" who, due to war and terror, are trying to cross the Mediterranean every night, do something to the idea of the sea.

"Flood of refugees"—such abusive language, so often used in media—why do I reproduce it here?

In *Waves*, the voice-over says: "and the sea is put to work." This is important. The new digital era has come up with metaphors such as "seas of information" and "oceans of data." In *Waves* Tan tries to actually follow these metaphors and bring their material fundament to the surface. One example is fiber-optic cables placed on the ocean floor, another how data servers are cooled by water from the Baltic Sea. And so, Tan shows us how certain metaphors are capable of opening up new material realities. This line of thought is influenced by new materialism and the emphasis on the agency of seemingly inanimate objects. But as soon as we approach conceptual, critical thinking, the question about labor has to be asked. So who works for whom by this conceptual displacement? And which ideas are kept static in order to put others in motion?

When the sea is transformed from an aesthetic object of pleasure into an active, living material, new boundaries are cut out and inscribed. This is the partly repressed objective that the gesture of conferring agency rests upon. If "oceans of data" turns out to be a legible, material reality for many of us, the materiality of the sea-metaphor "flood of refugees" is clearly unquestionable. But still, it doesn't make it legible for a majority of us, quite the contrary. The sea is put to work, as Tan puts it, but for whom? The material reality of "flood of refugees" is not only illegible, it marks a definitive incision in language. This will change us, this will change how we address each other.

Our new sea-metaphors point towards the materiality of the digital era, but also towards the materiality of global politics. The sea is, and has always been, political.

And even though mankind has known about the embodiment of metaphors long before the Eucharistic miracle, there is a difference when "flood of refugees" materializes as an embodied metaphor. Why? Because this one doesn't resurrect. Next to the oceans of data, the sea of information—metaphors that we readily accept as living material—there are others that are drowning.

There was another end to this text, in my former, shorter version. I talked about the starry skies, trying to outline a minimal ethics for our time. It is impossible for me today to keep that grandiose finale, when language makes metaphors out of drowning people.

The sea has its undertow, the light has its shadow, and the sound has its echo. In all three videos the beauty of natural phenomena is, in each and every instance, undercut by darkness: an undercurrent of violence brings them tension and charge. In *Sunsets* Lispector talks about José Miranda Rosa, alias Mineirinho, who was shot thirteen times and killed by the police in Rio de Janeiro in 1962—no need to explain its alarming importance today; *Notes From Underground* is permeated with violence—from the sparagmos-motive to Sontag’s reflection upon human cruelty; and lastly, *Waves*, which obviously not only references the title of Woolf’s novel, but just as much her brutal death by drowning, which unavoidably brings to the fore the hundreds of refugees that each day are drowning on the Mediterranean.

The materiality of the shadow is just as tangible as the origin, I said above. Now see how they all cringe.

## Notes

### Mara Lee

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans., Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982, 96.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translation as culture," *Parallax*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2000, 13.
3. Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, Princeton University Press, 1999, 29.
4. See for instance Lynne Huffer, "Blanchot's mother," *Yale French Studies*, no. 93, 1998; Frederic-Yves Jeannot, Hélène Cixous, Thomas Dutoit, "The Book That You Will not Write: An Interview with Hélène Cixous," *New Literary History*, Vol 37, no. 1, Winter 2006.
5. Anders Olsson, *Skillnadens konst. Sex kapitel om moderna fragment*, Albert Bonniers, 2006, 343. My translation.
6. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge, 2009 [2000], 45.
7. *Stockholm news, Online News in English*, May 19, 2011. For further reading, see the report: OECD. *International Migration Outlook 2014. Special focus: Mobilising Migrants' Skills for Economic Success*, 2014.
8. Sylvia Plath, "Nick and the Candlestick," *The Collected Poems*, Ed. Ted Hughes, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1981, 240.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans., Thomas Dutoit, Stanford University Press, 1993, 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 33.

### Lisa Tan

1. Michael Taussig, "When the Sun Goes Down: A Copernican Turn of Remembrance," Lecture, Monash University, Victoria, March 10, 2010, <http://www.digitalpodcast.com/items/7696283>. Thank you to Natascha Sadr Haghghian for letting me know about Taussig's lecture.
2. Tacita Dean, *The Green Ray from the Sun Quartet*, 2001.
3. Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, "Fondazione Nicola Trussardi Presents Still Life the First Major Solo Exhibition in Italy by Tacita Dean," Press Release, May 12, 2009, <http://www.fondazionenicolatrussardi.com>. This quote is pulled from one of several texts that Dean wrote on her individual films, all included in materials accompanying her 2009 exhibition in Milan.
4. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, Or, The History of Photography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11. Silverman reconceptualizes photography away from indexicality and representation and instead towards analogy. "When I say 'analogy,' I do not mean sameness, symbolic equivalence, logical adequation, or even a rhetorical relationship—like a metaphor or a simile—in which one term functions as the provisional placeholder for another. I am talking about the authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure Being, or what I will be calling 'the world,' and that give everything the same ontological weight."
5. Taussig, "When the Sun Goes Down."
6. *Ibid.*

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Installation images by Jean-Baptiste Beranger

*For every word has its own shadow* at Galleri Riis, Stockholm, 2015.

Three 190 x 106.8 cm single-channel projections in 16:9 HD video with speakers and headphones, carpet, paint, and wooden pedestals.

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